

Father Abraham

LESSON
ONE

THE LIFE OF ABRAHAM:
STRUCTURE AND
CONTENT



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Lesson One

The Life of Abraham: Structure and Content

INTRODUCTION

We all know that there are many differences among the nations of the earth. They all have their own geography, distinguishing ethnic groups and unique traditions. But at least one thing is common among most countries: we all have stories about how our nations began. So many of us love to hear about the sacrifices and accomplishments of the people who founded our countries. We sing the praises of their heroism.

Why do we cherish and share these stories of origin so much? Why is this such an important part of nearly every human culture?

Well, there are at least two reasons. On the one side, we talk about the origins of our nations to pass on memories of the past. We want our children to remember their roots, where they came from. But on the other side, we also want to remember the ideals that guided our nations in the past so that we can find direction for the future.

Well, something like this was true for the people of God in the Old Testament as well. The ancient Israelites cherished stories about their beginnings and passed them from generation to generation for the same two reasons. They told about the days of their ancestors to remember events long ago so that the great accomplishments of the past would not be forgotten. But they also passed these stories from generation to generation to remind themselves of the direction they should go in the future.

This is the first lesson in our series entitled, *Father Abraham*. In this series we will explore the stories that ancient Israelites told about Abraham, their great patriarch. And we will see that Moses wrote these stories in the book of Genesis so that the Israelites in his day would remember the past, and so that they would also understand more clearly the future God had in store for them.

This is the first of three lessons in this series, and we have entitled it, “The Life of Abraham: Structure and Content.” In this lesson we will begin our overview of Abraham’s life by concentrating on the structure and content of the chapters in Genesis that speak about him. How did Moses structure his account of Abraham’s life? What were the main concerns of these chapters?

We will explore the structure and content of Abraham’s life in two parts: first, we will look at the literary design of this material. And second, we will examine the major themes of these chapters. Let’s look first at the literary design of Abraham’s life.

LITERARY DESIGN

Whenever we approach portions of Scripture like the life of Abraham that consist primarily of narratives or stories, we must remember that biblical writers did more than simply tell us the truth about what happened long ago. Because the Holy Spirit inspired

them to be God's spokesmen, the history that they wrote was entirely true. But the Holy Spirit inspired them to address the needs of the people for whom they wrote, so biblical authors also wrote about history with their readers in mind. They intentionally designed their stories so that these stories would be relevant to the lives of the people who received them.

As we approach the record of Abraham's life in Genesis, we can be confident that these stories do not misrepresent what actually happened in Abraham's life. But in order to understand how these stories applied to the lives of Moses' original readers, we must also be aware of *how* Genesis portrays Abraham's life. And one of the chief ways we can begin to understand how Abraham is portrayed is to explore the literary design of Abraham's life in Genesis.

We'll explore the literary design of Abraham's life in two steps. In the first place, we will present an overview of the book of Genesis as a whole, and we will see how Abraham's story fits within the larger picture of Genesis. And in the second place, we will look at the structure of the stories that focus on Abraham's life. Let's begin with an overview of the entire book of Genesis.

GENESIS

Throughout the centuries, different interpreters have understood the overarching structure of Genesis in different ways. One approach has been to divide Genesis into ten segments based on the repetition of the so-called "generations" or "*toledot*" passages scattered throughout the book of Genesis. And we should admit that there is some value in this large-scale outlook. But we have suggested in other series' that it is much more helpful to think of Genesis in three large sections: the primeval history in Genesis 1:1–11:9; the early patriarchal history in 11:10–37:1; and the later patriarchal history in 37:2–50:26.

The primeval history of Genesis 1:1–11:9 presents God's revealed truth about the origins of the world. It speaks of the creation, the corruption of creation, and the reshaping of creation through a worldwide flood. And it holds together as a literary unit in the ways it resembles the patterns of many ancient near eastern primeval histories.

The later patriarchal history in 37:2–50:26 tells the story of Joseph. It begins with the story of conflict between Joseph and his brothers, then moves to Joseph's rise to power in Egypt and Joseph's reconciliation with his brothers in the end. Many interpreters have described this large, unified storyline as a *novella* about Joseph.

Between these first and last sections is Genesis 11:10–37:1. These chapters contain the early patriarchal history, collections of stories about the first fathers of the nation of Israel. In this series, we are concerned with one portion of this middle segment of Genesis.

In general terms, the early patriarchal history divides into two parts: the life of Abraham in 11:10–25:18 and the life of Jacob in 25:19–37:1. Now this twofold division may be surprising at first because in Scripture we frequently hear mention of *three* early patriarchs: Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. So, we might have reasonably expected the literary structure of these chapters to be threefold as well, first telling us about Abraham, then about Isaac and then about Jacob. But in actuality, no portion of the early patriarchal

history is devoted to Isaac as the main figure. Instead, he serves only as a transitional figure. His life is told first as a part of Abraham's life and then as a part of Jacob's life. And as a result, the early patriarchal history actually divides into only two main parts: the life of Abraham and then the life of Jacob. Our concern in this series is with the first half of the patriarchal period, Moses' record of Father Abraham. So let's take a closer look at the structure of Abraham's life as it is presented in Genesis 11:10–25:18.

ABRAHAM

Now that we have seen where the life of Abraham fits within the overarching structure of Genesis, we should turn to our next concern: the structure of Abraham's life in Genesis 11:10–25:18. To explore the structure of Abraham's life, we will look at these chapters on two levels: on the one hand, we will simply identify the *basic units* or episodes of Abraham's life, and on the other hand, we will examine how these various episodes have been arranged into the portrait of Abraham we have in Genesis. Let's first identify the basic units or episodes of Abraham's life.

Basic Units

Moses wrote about Abraham's life in seventeen basic segments or episodes:

1. First, Abraham's favored lineage (in 11:10-26), a genealogy that describes Abraham's family heritage.
2. This passage is followed by an account of Abraham's failing father (in 11:27-32), a second genealogy that describes Abraham's travels with his father Terah.
3. Abraham's migration to Canaan (in 12:1-9), the story of Abraham's initial call and travel to the Promised Land.
4. Abraham's deliverance from Egypt (in 12:10-20), the time when Abraham sojourned in Egypt and God delivered him.
5. Abraham's conflict with Lot (in 13:1-18), the story of struggle between Abraham's men and Lot's men.
6. Abraham's rescue of Lot (in 14:1-24), the time when Abraham went to war to rescue Lot from kings who had captured him.
7. Abraham's covenant promises (in 15:1-21), the account of God's covenant assuring Abraham that he would have many descendants and a permanent homeland.
8. Abraham's failure with Hagar (in 16:1-16), the time when Abraham had a child, Ishmael, with Sarah's handmaiden, Hagar.
9. Abraham's covenant requirements (in 17:1-27), the account of God's covenant that reminded Abraham of the necessity of loyalty to the commands of God.

10. Sodom and Gomorrah (in 18:1– 19:38), the story of the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah and Lot's rescue from that destruction.
11. Abraham's intercession for Abimelech (in 20:1-18), the time when Abraham prayed for Abimelech the Philistine.
12. Abraham's sons Isaac and Ishmael (in 21:1-21), the story of Isaac's birth and the expulsion of Ishmael from Abraham's family.
13. Abraham's treaty with Abimelech (in 21:22-34), the time when Abraham entered into an agreement with Abimelech over land and water rights.
14. Abraham's test (in 22:1-24), the well-known episode in which God called Abraham to sacrifice his son, Isaac.
15. Abraham's burial property (in 23:1-20), the story of Sarah's death and the purchase of a burial site.
16. A wife for Abraham's son Isaac (in 24:1-67), the time when Rebekah became Isaac's wife.
17. And finally, Abraham's death and heir (in 25:1-18), the closing story of Abraham's passing and the record of his descendants.

As we can see, the story of Abraham's life follows the basic order of events as they occurred in his life. The stories begin with him relatively young and under the authority of his father, and they end up with Abraham growing old and dying. On occasion, there are allusions and implicit connections among the various episodes of Abraham's life. But by comparison with other portions of the Old Testament, Abraham's life story consists of a series of seventeen relatively independent episodes. Each of these episodes was designed to report events in Abraham's life and to teach specific lessons to Moses' original Israelite audience. As Moses led them from Egypt toward the Promised Land, each of these episodes was to have much to offer them as they lived their lives just as it has much to offer us as we live our lives today.

Having introduced the basic episodes of Abraham's life, we are now in a position to explore how these units hold together. How is the story of Abraham unified? What logic organizes them? Simply put, the episodes of Abraham's life cluster around specific themes and these clusters form five symmetrical or balancing steps.

Arrangement

First, as we might expect at the beginning of the patriarch's life, Moses' record begins with Abraham's background and early experiences with God. This section includes: Abraham's favored lineage, his failing father, and his migration to Canaan. These chapters explain how Abraham entered into his special relationship with God by focusing on his family's background and his initial migration to the Promised Land.

The second cluster of episodes in Abraham's life concentrates on Abraham's earlier contacts with other peoples in 12:10 through 14:24. It includes his deliverance from Egypt, his conflict with Lot, and his rescue of Lot. These three episodes hold together because they concentrate primarily on Abraham's encounters and interactions with representatives of several groups of people. In these chapters the patriarch dealt primarily

with the Pharaoh of Egypt, his nephew Lot, invading kings, the king of Sodom and Melchizedek the king of Salem.

The third and central section of Abraham's life focuses on Abraham's covenant relationship with God in 15:1–17:27. This portion of the patriarch's life consists of three episodes: Abraham's covenant promises, Abraham's failure with Hagar, and Abraham's covenant requirements.

The fourth section, which appears in 18:1–21:34, turns to Abraham's later contacts with other peoples. These chapters hold together primarily because they concentrate on Abraham's interactions with other groups of people. These chapters describe Abraham in relation to Sodom and Gomorrah. We find Abraham's intercession for Abimelech, Abraham in relationship with Isaac and Ishmael, and Abraham's treaty with Abimelech. These four episodes further illustrate how the patriarch interacted with Lot and his family, as well as how he related to the people of Sodom and Gomorrah, and to the Philistine Abimelech.

As we might expect, the fifth and final section of the patriarch's life in 22:1–25:18, deals with matters toward the end of Abraham's life, especially with his progeny and death. It records how God tested Abraham. It records Abraham's purchase of burial property. It records how Abraham found a wife for his son Isaac. And it also records Abraham's death. These chapters focus on Abraham's wife Sarah and her son Isaac (the true heir of Abraham), giving them honor over Abraham's other wives and their sons.

Because the episodes of Abraham's life are relatively independent of each other, when people first read about Abraham, they often have a sense of wandering aimlessly from one event to another. They read the stories of Abraham as if Moses mentioned this event and that event with little forethought or planning. But despite this first impression, the stories of Abraham's life are actually organized into batches or groups of episodes that share central themes. Our simple five-step outline reveals that Moses actually planned what he was going to say about Abraham. On a large scale the record of Abraham's life takes the shape of a symmetrical drama. Each part balances with a corresponding part in the drama.

In 11:10–12:9, we find attention focused on Abraham's family background and on his initial experiences with God. In contrasting balance with these initial concerns, the closing material in 22:1–25:18 gives attention to Abraham's final years and to his progeny.

Beyond this, the second section of Abraham's life consists of episodes that primarily delineate Abraham's interactions with people from other tribes and nations. And by circular symmetry, returning to similar themes handled in the second part, the fourth section of Abraham's life returns to a focus on more examples of Abraham's encounters with others.

Finally, in the middle of Abraham's life, are three pivotal chapters that focus especially on Abraham's covenant with God. These chapters form the pivotal center of Abraham's life and explain the fundamental dynamics of the covenant relationship that Abraham and his descendants had with God.

The shape of these chapters reveals that Moses carefully crafted his account. He constructed a literary portrait of Israel's first patriarch to draw attention to certain aspects of his life: Abraham's selection to blessing and his rightful heir, Abraham's earlier and later interactions, and Abraham's covenant relationship with God. And as we are going to

see, this literary focus was designed to address the needs of the Israelites to whom Moses first wrote these stories. The life of Abraham taught the Israelites how they were to follow in the footsteps of Abraham as Moses led them toward the Promised Land. And as we approach this portion of Genesis, we are going to see the importance of this intentional design time and time again.

Having seen the overarching literary design of the life of Abraham, we should turn to the second topic of our lesson on the structure and content of Abraham's life: the main themes of Genesis 11:10–25:18. Although there are many ways to describe the content of these chapters, we will see that the outline we have suggested roughly corresponds to the prominent themes of these chapters.

MAJOR THEMES

Needless to say, it is difficult to describe the main themes of any portion of Scripture that is as long and complex as Abraham's life. It is just not possible to mention every motif or theme that appears in these chapters. But it is possible to isolate several motifs that are more prominent than others. And as we will see, these major themes in these chapters unify the stories of Abraham's life, and they help us understand the main ideas Moses wanted his original Israelite readers to draw from the life of Abraham. And more than this, we can also see, in these main themes, what God intends for us to learn from this part of Scripture.

We will look into the main themes of Abraham's life in two ways: First, we will examine a key passage that introduces the four main themes of Abraham's life. And second, we will explore the ways these themes are unfolded throughout the chapters of Abraham's life. Let's turn first to a key passage that introduces the themes of the story of Abraham.

KEY PASSAGE

I'm sure you will recall that near the opening of the story of Abraham's life, we find God's call to Abraham in Genesis 12:1-3. While Abraham still lived in Ur of Mesopotamia God called Abraham to go to the Promised Land. For many years now, interpreters have recognized that these verses introduce some of the most crucial motifs found in the larger story of Abraham's life. Listen to what Moses wrote in these verses:

The Lord had said to Abram, “Leave your country, your people and your father's household and go to the land I will show you. I will make you into a great nation and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you” (Genesis 12:1-3).

These three verses are packed with significance and can be summarized in many different ways. On a grammatical level, they begin with an introduction in the first portion of verse 1. Then they continue with God's words to Abraham, which divide into two parts. Part one, in the second half of verse 1 through most of verse 2 consists of an imperative followed by three independent verbal expressions. Part two of what God said to Abraham appears in the last portion of verse 2 and in verse 3. This second half follows the same grammatical pattern as the first half. It is introduced by an imperative that is followed by three independent verbal expressions. By looking at these three divisions of Genesis 12:1-3 we can gain some important insights into the significance of this passage.

Introduction

Listen first to the simple way Moses introduced God's words to Abraham in verse 1:

The Lord had said to Abram (Genesis 12:1).

A number of modern translations correctly observe that the verb in this line should be translated "the Lord *had said*" instead of "the Lord said." This translation is important because according to Stephen's speech in Acts 7:2-4, Abraham received his call in Ur before his father, Terah, died in Haran. But in the literary presentation of Genesis, we learn first that Terah died in 11:32 and then we learn in Genesis 12:1 that God called Abraham. For this reason, Genesis 12:1 represents a flashback, a regression in time, and should be translated "the Lord had said." This verse recalls an earlier moment before Abraham had begun to do anything in response to God, long before he had begun to move toward the Promised Land.

Part One

Following this introduction, we come upon the first half of God's words to Abraham. This first half begins with an imperative verb indicating a command. In Genesis 12:1 we read these words:

Leave your country, your people and your father's household and go to the land I will show you (Genesis 12:1).

As we can see, this section opens with the imperative, "leave" (or as the NIV paraphrases it "leave ... and go"). God commanded Abraham to do something: to go to the land of Canaan. This is the first and primary command God gave to the Patriarch.

After the command to leave for the Promised Land, the first part of God's words to Abraham divides into three sections indicated by three independent verbal expressions in the first part of verse 2. Look again at Genesis 12:2:

I will make you into a great nation and I will bless you; and I will make your name great (Genesis 12:2).

These words focus on blessings that God presented to Abraham as he called him. First, God said he would make Abraham into a great nation. Second, he offered to bless Abraham with prosperity. And third, he said he would give Abraham and his descendants a great name, or reputation.

Part Two

Now we come to the second half of God's words to Abraham. Although most modern translations do not enable us to see it, the second part of God's words to Abraham parallels the grammatical structure of the first half. It begins with an imperative followed by three independent verbal expressions. In Genesis 12:2-3 we read these words:

And you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you (Genesis 12:2-3).

The Hebrew verb, translated here, "You will be a blessing," is imperative in form, and probably designed to parallel the form of the command "leave" in verse 1. But this imperative does not function as a command. It may be translated in a number of ways such as: "and you will be a blessing," or "and may you be a blessing," or even, "and you will certainly be a blessing." In all events, this imperative marks an important transition in thought. It shifts attention away from Abraham receiving blessings (as we have seen in the first part of verse 2) to Abraham becoming a conduit of blessings to others.

This second imperative form is also followed by three independent verbal expressions. These three verbs indicate the process by which Abraham would become a blessing to others. First, God said, "I will bless those who bless you ..." That is, God would give good things to those who dealt positively with Abraham. When people treated Abraham well, God would treat them well. Second, God promised, "whoever curses you, I will curse ..." That is, God would curse those who disdained Abraham. God promised to protect Abraham from harm by responding harshly to those who made themselves Abraham's enemies. But in the third place, God said, "all peoples ... will be blessed through you." At first glance, this third focus may seem to contradict the theme of cursing for Abraham's enemies, but God promised Abraham that by means of a twofold process of blessing Abraham's friends and cursing his enemies, God would extend his blessings ultimately to all the families of the earth. So we see that the grammar of the opening of Genesis chapter 12 divides into three main parts: an introduction, a focus on blessings God would give to Abraham and a focus on the blessings that God would bring to the whole world through Abraham.

Understanding the structure of these verses in Genesis chapter 12 is important because in many respects the stories of Abraham in Genesis illustrate how these promises God made to Abraham were fulfilled in his life. As Moses wrote about the patriarch, he

shaped his stories in ways that drew attention to the words that God spoke to Abraham as he called him to the Promised Land.

With this grammatical structure in mind, we are ready to see how the main themes of Abraham's life unfold from Genesis 12:1-3.

UNFOLDING

We will note that there are four major themes that appear in these verses. We will begin with divine grace toward Abraham. Then we will continue with the requirement of Abraham's loyalty to God, then God's blessings to Abraham, and finally God's blessings through Abraham.

Divine Grace

The first motif, which occurs many times in the life of Abraham, is that God's relationship with Abraham was based on his grace. Divine grace appears in a subtle way in the introductory words of Genesis 12:1. As we have seen, there we read these words:

The Lord had said to Abram (Genesis 12:1).

These simple words reminded Moses' original audience that Abraham's relationship with God came about because God had entered into Abraham's life long before Abraham had done anything in service to God.

Abraham's call came very early in his adult life. He had not left for Canaan; he had not conquered enemies; he had not committed to covenant faithfulness; he had not prayed for the righteous in Sodom and Gomorrah; he had not passed any test of faith. On the contrary, God called Abraham as his special servant simply because it pleased God to be gracious to Abraham.

Now of course, God's grace was not only shown in the initial stage of Abraham's walk with God. The grace of God is a theme that appears throughout the stories of Abraham because God also showed mercy to the patriarch at every moment of his life. Because Abraham was a sinner, Abraham was in need of God's mercy all the time. For example, in the well-known verse Genesis 15:6 we learn that even Abraham's saving righteousness was a gift of mercy. There we read these words:

Abraham believed the Lord, and he credited it to him as righteousness (Genesis 15:6).

As the apostle Paul pointed out in Romans 4:3 and Galatians 3:6 the fact that God credited Abraham with righteousness indicated that this was an act of mercy, not a reward for good works. And it was through divine grace and mercy that Abraham received this and many other blessings from God.

As Christians we all know the importance of God's grace in our lives. We know that God initiates our relationship with him by his grace and we know that he sustains us in our relationship with him by his grace. Where would we be without the mercy of God? Well, the same thing was true for Abraham. And more than this, God's grace was also essential for the lives of the Israelites for whom Moses wrote about Abraham. They too needed God's mercy in their lives in their day, day after day. And for this reason, as Moses composed his stories of Abraham's life, he drew their attention over and over to God's grace.

Abraham's Loyalty

In addition to the theme of God's grace, we should also notice that Genesis 12:1-3 stresses Abraham's loyalty. God did not merely choose Abraham to receive his mercy; he showed mercy to the patriarch so that Abraham would respond with faithful obedience. As we have seen, the first imperative of Genesis 12:1 stresses Abraham's responsibility to be faithful to the Lord in a particular way. God commanded him there:

Leave your country, your people and your father's household and go to the land I will show you (Genesis 12:1).

It doesn't take much imagination to see that this divine call required enormous loyalty from Abraham. He was to leave his homeland and his father's estate behind and to go to a place yet to be shown him. Yes, God had shown mercy to Abraham, but Abraham was also expected to show deep-seated, loyal service to God.

Unfortunately, many Christians tend to think of Abraham merely as an example of faith and trust in God. This is an important theme in Abraham's life and it is highlighted in several New Testament passages. But we must never overlook the fact that God commanded Abraham to be obedient, to give him his loyal service. God required loyalty from the patriarch many times. He was to be faithful to God in every circumstance.

Perhaps the most dramatic example of a time when Abraham was required to show his loyalty to God is found in Genesis 22, a time when God commanded the patriarch to sacrifice his son Isaac to prove that he loved God more than he loved his son. It would be hard to imagine a higher requirement from God.

Although Abraham was required to show faithfulness in this and many other ways, Genesis 12:1 makes clear one of the most important responsibilities Abraham had. There God said:

Go to the land I will show you (Genesis 12:1).

As this passage demonstrates, Abraham was required to go to the land that God would show him. Abraham was to inhabit the land of promise, and this theme appears many times in the stories about the Patriarch. It was very important to the larger plan of God both for Abraham and his faithful descendants that the Patriarch go to the Promised Land.

And when we recall that Moses wrote these stories about Abraham for Israelites whom he was himself leading toward the Promised Land, it is not surprising at all to see this emphasis.

As followers of Christ, we understand that although salvation is a free gift of God's grace, God expects us to show our gratitude to him by doing our best to obey his commands. Moses understood this principle as well. He knew that God's grace to Abraham led Abraham to be loyal to God. And for this reason, we are going to see that the requirement of loyalty appears many times as we study the life of Abraham. Moses knew something about his original Israelite audience. They were prone to forget the importance of faithful living before God. Although God had shown them much mercy as he delivered them from Egypt and sustained them in the wilderness, they turned from God's commandments. And for this reason, one of the main themes in the stories of Abraham was Abraham's loyalty to God. This theme appears so frequently because Moses' original audience, and we today as well, need to be motivated to serve God in faithful obedience.

Blessings to Abraham

As we have seen so far, God showed much grace to Abraham, and required faithful devotion from him. The third theme we should notice in Genesis 12:1-3 is the blessings offered *to* Abraham. You'll recall that God said this to the Patriarch in Genesis 12:2:

I will make you into a great nation and I will bless you; I will make your name great (Genesis 12:2).

God offered the patriarch three blessings. In the first place, God said that Abraham would become a great nation. His progeny would grow beyond number. And his descendants would actually become an empire, a grand nation. At that time Abraham and those who were with him were relatively few in number. And Abraham had no children of his own. Yet, God promised that the number of Abraham's descendants would one day be more than the stars in the sky.

In the second place, God told Abraham that he would bless him. In all likelihood, this expression means that Abraham and his descendants would receive the blessing of tremendous prosperity. Abraham and his descendants would live in abundance and wealth. They would not be wanderers on the earth, nor would they be mere settlers. As Abraham and his children proved faithful, they would enjoy great prosperity.

In the third place, God's offer of blessing entailed the bestowal of a great name on Abraham. In other words, if Abraham would go to the Promised Land and serve God faithfully, the massive numbers and prosperity of his descendants would make him, and them, honored throughout the world. Great glory would come to the patriarch and his faithful descendants.

In fact, throughout the stories of Abraham, Moses pointed out over and over that these kinds of blessings were poured out on Abraham. Abraham had sons; he gained wealth as he went from one experience to another. He became a well-known figure in the

region. For the Israelites who heard these stories, Abraham's blessings brought great hope for their future blessings as well. The gifts of descendants, prosperity and fame given to the patriarch were mere foreshadows of even greater gifts God would give to Abraham's faithful descendants.

As Christians, we have received so many blessings from God that we can hardly name them all. And of course, the Israelites who followed Moses toward the Promised Land had also received countless blessings from God. They had been delivered from slavery; they had increased in number; they had been protected and sustained throughout their entire journey and they were on their way to the land of promise, a land of great blessing in the future. But the Israelites were like us, prone to forget all that God had done for them and what was in store for them. So Moses wrote about God's blessings to Abraham to remind his Israelite audience of the blessings that God had given them in their lives so that their hearts would be filled with gratitude.

Blessings through Abraham

In addition to God's mercy, Abraham's loyalty, and God's blessings to Abraham, Genesis 12:1-3 also draws attention to the fact that blessings would come *through* Abraham to other peoples. Remember what God said in Genesis 12:2-3:

And you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you (Genesis 12:2-3).

These words explained that Abraham would not only receive blessings but that all peoples on earth will be blessed through him. God did not call Abraham to the Promised Land simply to enrich his life and the lives of his descendants. God called Abraham to be a conduit of divine blessings to all the families of the earth. Now it is important to remember that this passage teaches that Abraham's worldwide blessing would come about in two ways. In Genesis 12:3 God said:

I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse (Genesis 12:3).

According to this passage, Abraham would serve as a double-edged sword among human beings. Because Abraham was favored by God, when people from other nations blessed Abraham, that is, when they honored him and thus honored the God whom he served, then God would bless them. But when people of other nations cursed or attacked Abraham and thus disdained Abraham's God, God would punish them. The fates of other peoples depended on how they treated Abraham.

In his lifetime, Abraham came into contact with many people representing other nations such as the Philistines, the Canaanites, the Egyptians, and his nephew Lot, who was the father of the Moabites and the Ammonites. These interactions were significant because they showed specific ways in which God kept his word to bless and curse other

peoples depending on how they treated Abraham. They also indicated that even in his own lifetime Abraham had begun to become a blessing to the world.

All too often it is easy for God's people to forget this important teaching. The Israelites in Moses' day were like many Christians living today. We enjoy the blessing of salvation from God and life from God, but we forget why these blessings have been given to each of us. Each and every blessing God gave to Israel under Moses' leadership and each and every blessing he gives to his church today is designed for a greater purpose. We have been blessed so that we will spread the blessings of God throughout the world. God called Abraham to himself so that Abraham would lead the nations of the world into God's blessings. God called Israel to himself in Moses' day so that they would lead the nations of the world into God's blessings. And God has called the church to himself today so that we may lead the nations of the world into the blessings of God. This theme was so important for the Israelites who first received the stories of Abraham. And it is important for us too as we follow Christ in our day.

CONCLUSION

In this lesson we have taken our first look at an overview of the life of Abraham. And we have focused our attention on the structure, or design, of this portion of Genesis. And we have also examined the main themes, or content, that Moses presented in Abraham's life in the context of this literary structure.

As we move forward in these lessons, we will return to the topics of this lesson time and again. We have seen that the story of Abraham's life has a five-step symmetry. And we have also seen that there are four main themes in Abraham's life: God's benevolence to Abraham, Abraham's loyalty, the blessings of God to Abraham, and the blessings of God through Abraham. These themes not only give us insights into what the story of Abraham's life meant long ago when it was first written for Israel, but they also make it possible for us to apply this portion of Scripture to our lives today.

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Father Abraham

LESSON
TWO

THE LIFE OF ABRAHAM: ORIGINAL MEANING



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Father Abraham

Lesson Two

The Life of Abraham: Original Meaning

INTRODUCTION

Sincere followers of Christ love the Scriptures. We find that they speak to our lives in many different and very personal ways. This is a precious truth about Scripture that Christians should never forget. But many times this wonderfully personal dimension of Scripture can actually cause us to lose sight of something that we must always remember. The Bible was not written directly to you or me. In the first place, Scripture was written to other people who lived thousands of years ago. So as we try to understand how the Scriptures apply to our lives today, we must always be careful to base our modern applications on the original meaning of Scripture.

This is a series of lessons that we have entitled *Father Abraham*. And in these lessons we are exploring the account of Abraham's life that appears in Genesis 11:10–25:18.

This is the second of three introductory lessons, and we have entitled this lesson “The Life of Abraham: Original Meaning.” In this lesson we will see how important it is to read the stories of Abraham's life in light of when they were written and to whom they were written. We will explore the original impact these stories were intended to have on the nation of Israel as they followed Moses toward the Promised Land.

We will explore the original meaning of Genesis 11:10–25:18 by looking at two main issues. First, we will point out how Moses drew connections between the history of Abraham's life and the experiences of his original audience. And second, we will summarize some of the implications these connections had for the original audience.

Before we look at the original meaning of the life of Abraham, we should take a moment to review what we saw in the previous lesson. Up to this point, we have focused on two critical issues. First, we suggested that Genesis 12:1-3 reveals four major themes in the story of Abraham. God's kindness to Abraham (the many ways God showed mercy to the patriarch), Abraham's responsibility to be loyal to God (the many ways God expected Abraham to obey him), God's blessings to Abraham (the promises of a great nation, many children, a land, and a great name) and God's blessings through Abraham to others (the promise that Abraham would be a blessing to all the families of the earth).

Beyond this, we also saw that these major themes shaped the way Abraham's story was told in Genesis. We learned that the story of Abraham divides into five symmetrical steps. First, we begin with Abraham's background and early experiences in 11:10–12:9. Second, several episodes concentrate on Abraham's earlier interactions with representatives of other peoples in 12:10–14:24. The third and central segment of Abraham's life focuses on the covenant that God made with Abraham in 15:1–17:27. The fourth section of Abraham's life turns to Abraham's later interactions with representatives of other peoples in 18:1–21:34. And the fifth segment deals with Abraham's progeny and death in 22:1–25:18.

These five steps present the patriarch's life in a symmetrical pattern. The third section of 15:1–17:27, which deals with God's covenant with Abraham, serves as the centerpiece of Abraham's life. The second and fourth sections correspond to each other as they both focus on Abraham's interactions with other peoples. The first and last sections correspond to each other further by providing bookends to Abraham's life, tracing his family line from the past and into the future.

In many respects, this lesson will build on these insights into the structure and content of Abraham's life. With this review in mind, we are ready to move into the main concerns of this lesson, the original meaning of the life of Abraham in the book of Genesis. Let's begin by exploring the connections that exist between the stories about Abraham and the experiences of Israel who first received these stories.

CONNECTIONS

In this series of lessons we are building our interpretation of the life of Abraham on the assumption that these stories were originally written in the days of Moses, and that they are substantially the same now as they were then. Most critical scholars believe that these stories were not written in the days of Moses, but other portions of the Old Testament as well as Jesus himself insisted that Moses did write Genesis, and because of this modern Christians should have affirmed the Mosaic authorship of this book. But in this series we are also concerned with going a step further. We want to grasp not just the fact that Moses wrote these stories; we want to know why he wrote them. What was his perspective on the life of Abraham? What was his purpose in writing? One of the best ways to begin to explore the original meaning of Abraham's life is to look for the ways Moses connected his stories about Abraham with the experiences of his original audience, the Israelites who followed him away from Egypt and toward the Promised Land.

To explore how Moses connected his stories about Abraham to his original audience, we will touch on three matters: first, we will explore what we mean when we speak of these connections. Second, we will look at some types of connections that appear within the stories of Abraham's life; and third, we will summarize the connections in these stories by looking at each of the five major steps in the structure of Abraham's life story. Let's begin with what we mean when we speak of connections.

DEFINITION

In many ways, when Moses composed his history of Abraham's life, he found himself in a situation that all writers of biblical narratives found themselves. He stood between two worlds. On the one hand, Moses had received accounts of what we will call "that world": the world of Abraham. He knew about what had happened in Abraham's life some 500 to 600 years earlier both from tradition and from extraordinary revelation

from God. In this sense, Moses dealt in the first place with the ancient world of Abraham's life.

But on the other hand, Moses also dealt with the world in which he lived, what we might call "their world": the world of Moses and the Israelites who followed him. As the leader of God's people at that time, Moses wrote his stories about the ancient world of Abraham's life for the sake of meeting the needs of their world.

As Moses mediated between "that world" of Abraham's life and "their world" (his contemporary world), he drew connections between the patriarch's life and the lives of his readers so that they could see the relevance of the stories that he wrote. That is to say, Moses selected and shaped his stories in ways that made it possible for the Israelites following him to see that Abraham's life had connections to their lives. In large part, Moses did this by writing so that his audience could draw comparisons and contrasts between Abraham and their own contemporary experiences. Sometimes these comparisons and contrasts were only slight and other times they were more extensive, but in every episode Moses somehow drew attention to these kinds of connections between Abraham's life and the lives of his original audience.

Now that we have seen the basic idea of connections and original meaning, let's turn to our second concern, the types of connections that Moses established between Abraham's life and the experiences of his original Israelite audience.

TYPES

For any story to have relevance for its readers, it must portray a world that its readers can understand. If the world of a story is completely different from the real world, if readers cannot relate to the story's characters and themes, then the story will not communicate. Or to put it in terms of this lesson, if "that world" of Abraham was completely different from "their world" of Moses and the Israelites, the stories about Abraham would not have been meaningful or relevant to the Israelites. So, Moses worked very hard to draw connections between Abraham's world and the world of the Israelites who were moving toward the Promised Land.

The question before us in this lesson is how Moses made these connections clear. How did he shape his stories about Abraham so that they connected to his readers' world? As we move forward in this series, we will see that Moses connected his accounts to the experiences of the Israelites in three main ways. First, he wrote his stories so that they told the Israelites about the historical backgrounds of things they experienced. And second, he wrote so that his narratives provided the Israelites with models or examples to follow or to avoid. And third, he wrote to show that many of the patriarch's experiences foreshadowed or adumbrated the Israelite's experiences. Because we will refer to these kinds of connections many times in future lessons, we should introduce all three of these techniques that Moses used to show the relevance of Abraham's life for his original audience. Let's look first at how Abraham's life provided backgrounds for Israel's experience in Moses' day.

Backgrounds

In many ways, this is the easiest of all connections to identify. It is quite common for people in all walks of life to tell stories to each other for the main purpose of explaining the historical backgrounds of things they experience. Parents often do this with children, teachers illustrate their teachings in this way, pastors, and even political leaders do the same. We often connect stories to our audiences by drawing attention to the way they provide historical backgrounds.

Now with respect to the life of Abraham, we can describe this connection in this way: we find the connection of historical backgrounds when Moses pointed to ways in which Israel's experiences were historically rooted in the events of Abraham's life. Take for instance, the way Moses explained the historical background of viewing the land of Canaan as Israel's homeland. You will recall that a number of times during the exodus the Israelites wondered why they had to go all the way to the land of Canaan. Why would Moses not allow them to stop short of entering that land?

On a number of occasions, Moses addressed this very issue by providing certain details about the historical background of Abraham's life. In a word, he showed that God had specifically given Abraham a homeland in Canaan so that the Israelites could see why he insisted that they too had a homeland in Canaan. For instance, we read these words that God spoke to Abraham in Genesis 15:18:

To your descendants I give this land, from the river of Egypt to the great river, the Euphrates (Genesis 15:18).

This passage established the origin or historical background of Moses' insistence that Israel possess Canaan. God had given that land to Israel's great father and he had given it to them as his descendants, so settling in some other land would not do.

As we explore more details of Abraham's life we will see that Moses frequently pointed to these kinds of historical backgrounds. A second main way that Moses connected the life of Abraham to Israel in his day was by providing them with models. Let's see how modeling worked in these stories.

Models

Moses did not want his original readers to receive the stories of Abraham as mere background information; he described many situations in the patriarch's life so that they could see a significant number of similarities between the circumstances of Abraham's life and their own circumstances. These similarities raised moral issues for Moses' audience. Moses pointed out that these similarities made it possible for Israel to see examples to follow and to reject.

Telling stories for the sake of providing models or examples is a common way to connect stories to our listeners. It happens all the time. When we warn someone at work not to do this or that, we often add a story about what happened the last time someone made this mistake. If we are teaching children why they should work hard in school, we

often reinforce instruction with stories that give examples of people who have a great success because they have worked hard in school.

Moses often did the same thing to connect his stories about Abraham to his original Israelite audience. He presented Abraham's story so that his characters could serve as models for Israel to follow or reject. Consider for instance, how Moses exhorted the Israelites to boldness against the threat of the Canaanites who occupied the Land of Canaan. We know from the books of Numbers and Deuteronomy that the Israelites following Moses refused to enter Canaan because powerful Canaanites occupied the land. Their hearts were full of dread because the Canaanites seemed to be an invincible foe. In Deuteronomy 1:26-28 we read these words of Moses to the tribes of Israel:

But you were unwilling to go up; you rebelled against the command of the Lord your God. You grumbled in your tents and said, "The Lord hates us; so he brought us out of Egypt to deliver us into the hands of the Amorites to destroy us. Where can we go? Our brothers have made us lose heart. They say, 'The people are stronger and taller than we are; the cities are large, with walls up to the sky'" (Deuteronomy 1:26-28).

One of the ways Moses addressed this fear of the Canaanites was to provide his readers with the example of Abraham facing Canaanites in his day. For instance, we find the first reference to Canaanites in Abraham's life in Genesis 12:6:

Abram traveled through the land ... At that time the Canaanites were in the land (Genesis 12:6).

And in a similar way, in Genesis 13:7 we read these words:

The Canaanites and the Perizzites were also living in the land at that time (Genesis 13:7).

Why did Moses mention the Canaanites' presence in the land of promise twice in two adjacent episodes? One of his purposes was to show Israel that Abraham's situation was very similar to theirs. Canaanites were in the Promised Land in Abraham's day, just as they were in the days of Moses in Israel. Yet, Abraham believed the promises of God and went forward boldly into the land occupied by Canaanites. In this way Moses encouraged his readers to imitate Abraham's boldness by trusting the promises of God and by going into the land even though Canaanites still occupied it. In this way Abraham became their example to follow.

As we make our way through the life of Abraham, we will find many passages that offer positive and negative examples. But in the third place, there were times when Moses connected the life of Abraham to the lives of his readers by showing how events in the patriarch's life foreshadowed or adumbrated events that took place in his day.

Foreshadows

In many respects, the connection of historical backgrounds requires very little similarity between the story and its audience to accomplish its purpose; examples or models require more similarity between the story and its audience for the example to be relevant. But foreshadowing occurs only when there are many similarities, so much so that “that world” of Abraham looks almost exactly like “their world” of Israel. Now this kind of extensive connection occurs infrequently in the stories of Abraham’s life, but from time to time, Moses described the days of Abraham in ways that closely resembled events in his own day.

Many of us have heard the adage, “History often repeats itself.” Of course, we all know that no two sets of historical events are ever exactly alike. But sometimes events are so similar that the second seems to be a repetition of the first. When biblical writers saw events in the past seemed to be repeated in the lives of their audiences, they often made this connection clear. And this literal technique is known as foreshadowing.

One example of foreshadowing appears in the well-known episode that describes Abraham’s covenant with God in Genesis 15:1-21. God gave Abraham assurance that his descendants would one day possess the land of Canaan by calling him to prepare for a covenant ritual. Abraham prepared by cutting some animals in half and by placing the pieces of their torn flesh on either side of a path. After the patriarch had fallen asleep, he had a vision of something that closely resembled an experience the original audience had in their day. In Genesis 15:17 we read these words:

When the sun had set and darkness had fallen, a smoking firepot with a blazing torch appeared and passed between the pieces (Genesis 15:17).

In the larger context of this passage we learn that this smoking pot and blazing torch represented God himself passing among the torn flesh of animals as an assurance that he would surely give Abraham’s descendants the land of promise.

Now get the picture. In Genesis 15:17 God passed before Abraham as smoking fire to assure him that God would give his descendants the land of promise. Now, to us as modern readers it may seem strange for God to assure Abraham by appearing as smoke and fire. But when we remember that Moses wrote about Abraham’s life for the Israelites following him toward the Promised Land, it is not surprising at all that he would include this detail. Throughout the Israelites’ travels, God had appeared before Israel in a way that resembled the smoking pot and flaming torch. In the glory cloud that led them toward the Promised Land, God appeared to them too as smoke and fire.

So, in this way God’s appearance to Abraham foreshadowed the way he appeared to the Israelites in Moses’ day. And as Abraham gained assurance of possessing the land because God went before him in this manner, the Israelites hearing this story should have gained assurance of possessing the land in their day as well.

Another, even more extensive foreshadowing occurs in the episode of Abraham’s deliverance from Egypt found in Genesis 12:10-20. This passage was written to guide Israel in their outlooks on Egypt. In this case, Moses constructed the entire episode so that it closely paralleled the experience of Israelites under his leadership. In Genesis

12:10-20 Abraham began a sojourn in Egypt because of a famine in the Land of Canaan, he was delayed in Egypt when Pharaoh took Sarah into his harem, but God delivered Abraham by sending diseases on Pharaoh's house. Pharaoh then sent Abraham away from Egypt and Abraham left Egypt with great wealth.

This story about Abraham was clearly designed to foreshadow the experience of the nation of Israel generations later. Just like Abraham, they sojourned to Egypt because of a famine in the Land of Canaan, they were held there by Pharaoh they were delivered by disease sent from God to the house of Pharaoh, Pharaoh ordered Israel's release, and Israel left Egypt having plundered the riches of the Egyptians. Moses purposefully shaped this account so that it foreshadowed the experiences of his audience. This kind of extensive foreshadowing is rare in the stories of Abraham, but such connections appear here and there in Abraham's stories.

As we read through the life of Abraham we will see all three connections in different ways and at different times. Moses connected "that world" of Abraham's life to "their world," the world of his original audience, by giving them the historical backgrounds of their experiences, by providing them with models to follow and reject, and by showing how Abraham's life foreshadowed many of their experiences.

Now that we have seen the types of connections that Moses established between Abraham and his Israelite audience, it will be helpful to summarize how each major step of Abraham's life connected to the lives of the original audience.

SUMMATION

You will recall that Abraham's life divides into five symmetrical steps. In each of these sections Moses found ways to connect the stories about Abraham to the circumstances of his original audience.

First, Moses told about Abraham's background and early experiences in ways that connected to the background and early experiences of the people who had followed him out of Egypt. Both Abraham and Israel descended from the same family. And both Abraham and Israel had been called by God to inhabit the land of Canaan. So, Moses gave historical backgrounds, set up Abraham as a model, and even showed ways that Abraham's life foreshadowed the experiences of the original audience.

Second, Moses also described Abraham's early interactions with others in ways that connected to his audience. He spoke of how Abraham interacted with Egyptians because Israel interacted with Egyptians in their day. He spoke about Abraham and Lot because Israel interacted with descendants of Lot, the Moabites and the Ammonites. He wrote about kings from the east and the Canaanite king of Sodom because Israel had similar experiences with foreign kings and Canaanite cities.

Third, Moses wrote about God's covenant with Abraham because Israel had entered into covenant with God as well. Abraham's covenant with God foreshadowed the covenant God made with Israel in many different ways.

Fourth, Moses wrote about Abraham's later interactions with other peoples. He wrote about the people of Sodom and Gomorrah, Lot, and Abimelech the Philistine because Israel faced similar people in their day: the Canaanite cities, the Moabites and the Ammonites, and the Philistines.

And fifth, Moses wrote about Abraham's progeny and death in a way that connected with his Israelite readers. He focused on Isaac as Abraham's special son and heir because his Israelite audience was descended from Isaac. He drew attention to the burial ground for Sarah because that ground was in the land God promised to Israel. He drew attention to other sons of Abraham who were not Abraham's heirs, especially Ishmael, because Israel had to deal with the Ishmaelites in their day.

So we see that as Moses wrote about Abraham he drew many different connections between his stories and the experiences of his Israelite audience. And he did this in order to provide significant guidance for the Israelites as they followed him toward the Promised Land.

Now that we have seen the main ways Moses connected Abraham's life to his original Israelite audience, we need to ask another important question about the original meaning. What were the implications of these connections for the original audience? What were they to learn from the stories of Abraham's life?

IMPLICATIONS

There should be little doubt that when people take time to write a history as complex as Abraham's life in Genesis, they have all kinds of motivations and goals. They want their stories to have multiple impacts on their audiences. In fact, when Moses wrote the life of Abraham, his intentions were so manifold that it is impossible to decipher them completely, much less to state them all in a few sentences. At the same time, it is possible to summarize the chief implications Moses hoped his original audience would draw from his stories about Abraham.

We will explore the original implications of the life of Abraham in three steps. First, we will describe the basic impact that these stories were designed to have on the original audience. Second, we will see how the impact of these stories unfolds in the four major themes of Abraham's life. And third, we will summarize the original implications of each of the five steps in Moses' stories about Abraham. Let's look first at the basic impact these stories were designed to have.

BASIC IMPACT

In very general terms, it helps to summarize the purpose of Abraham's story in this way: Moses wrote about Abraham to teach Israel why and how they were to leave Egypt behind and to continue toward the conquest of the Promised Land. In other words, by seeing the historical backgrounds of their lives in Abraham, by finding models or examples to follow and reject in the stories of Abraham, and by discerning how his life foreshadowed their lives, the Israelites following Moses could see the ways they were to pursue God's purpose for them.

Although we can be confident on the basis of the testimony of Scripture and even Jesus himself that the book of Genesis comes from the days of Moses, we should note

that we cannot be sure precisely when Moses completed these stories as we have them now. Whatever the case, we may safely say that Moses' main concern when writing the history of Abraham would have been very similar for either generation. He wrote about Abraham to turn their hearts away from Egypt and toward possessing the Promised Land.

This general implication for the original audience can hardly be overemphasized. Moses wrote to encourage the nation of Israel following him never to return back to Egypt and to succeed in the conquest of Canaan and this broad implication guides us in our modern application of Abraham's life. As Christians we are on a journey, a journey that actually completes the journey begun by Israel in the days of Moses. We are moving toward the new heavens and new earth. So, for us to apply Abraham's stories properly to our lives, we must pay attention to the ways they instructed the original audience to keep moving toward Canaan.

To unpack this overarching focus a bit, we should look into Moses' purpose in more detail by returning to the four major themes we have already identified in this portion of Genesis.

MAJOR THEMES

You will recall that earlier in this lesson we suggested that Genesis 12:1-3 presents at least four themes that give coherence to this part of the patriarchal history. These four themes express the central impact Moses designed his stories to have. First, he focused on divine grace to Abraham; second, he concentrated on Abraham's loyalty; third, he was concerned with blessings *to* Abraham; and fourth, he focused on blessing *through* Abraham. It helps to think of Moses' original purpose for writing about Abraham in terms of these four motifs.

Divine Grace

In the first place, Moses wrote about the ways God had shown mercy to Abraham. In broad terms, we have already seen that God showed much grace to Abraham, both in the early years of his relationship with God and on a daily basis throughout his entire life. The motif of divine grace was designed to remind the Israelites in Moses' day that God had shown great mercy to them as well. God had shown them early grace when he brought them from Egypt to Sinai. And day after day, he continued to show them mercy, even as he prepared them for the future conquest of Canaan.

The well-known words God spoke at Sinai in Exodus 19:4 speak of God's grace in this way:

You yourselves have seen what I did to Egypt, and how I carried you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself (Exodus 19:4).

Sadly, the Israelites who Moses led had forgotten how much mercy they had received from God. Early on they complained that God and Moses had cheated them by taking

them away from the comforts of Egypt. They complained about food and water in the wilderness. They thought God had asked too much of them when he called them to enter the conquest for the Promised Land. So, Moses frequently stressed the ways God showed mercy to Abraham to remind his original audience of the ways God had blessed them, the mercies God had shown to them over and over.

Abraham's Loyalty

In the second place, we have seen that Moses also emphasized Abraham's loyalty by drawing attention to the many ways God held Abraham responsible to obey his commands. Moses repeatedly emphasized that God expected the patriarch to be faithful to his commands because this focus was also relevant for the Israelites who followed him. This focus on the requirement of loyalty also spoke to Israel in Moses day. Listen to the way God continued to address Israel at Mount Sinai in Exodus 19:4-5:

You yourselves have seen what I did to Egypt, and how I carried you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself. Now if you obey me fully and keep my covenant, then out of all nations you will be my treasured possession (Exodus 19:4-5).

Notice here that the blessings of becoming a treasured possession were dependent on Israel's faithfulness. Although God had shown much mercy to the nation, the status of each person in each generation depended on how they responded to the commands of God.

Now, as we have seen, the main responsibility given to Abraham was that he go to the land of Canaan. Moses stressed this responsibility because he wanted Israel following him to stay the course for the land of Canaan as well. And of course, as Moses wrote about Abraham's other responsibilities, he did so to teach the Israelites of his day about their many other responsibilities. The many requirements of loyalty from Abraham spoke plainly to the fact that the original audience was to be loyal and faithful to the commands of God as well.

Blessings to Abraham

In the third place, we have also seen the importance of the theme of God's promised blessings to Abraham. In his stories about Abraham, Moses focused on the promised blessings of a great nation, prosperity and a great name for Abraham and his descendants. And on a number of occasions we even see that Abraham experienced some foretastes of these blessings in his own lifetime. And on many other occasions the stories of Abraham focused on the future fulfillments of these blessings in generations to come. Moses focused on Abraham's blessings these ways because these promises were also for Abraham's descendants, the people of Israel whom Moses led. The people of Israel were promised great blessings too. They were to become a great nation, to experience

unprecedented prosperity and to receive a great name when they entered into the Promised Land.

In fact, much like Abraham, Israel had also experienced many foretastes of these blessings by the time the book of Genesis was written. They had already begun to see fulfillments of some of these promises in their own lives. Yet, there were still many future fulfillments of these blessings to come once they entered the land of promise. God spoke of these future blessings for Israel at Sinai in this way in Exodus 19:6:

**You will become for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation
(Exodus 19:6).**

Moses wrote of the blessings God promised Abraham to raise the hopes of Israel in his day. As they read of God's promises to the patriarch, they could clearly see how God had great blessings in store for them as well.

Blessings through Abraham

In the fourth place, we have also seen that the stories of Abraham revealed that God's blessings would also come through the patriarch to the entire world. As you will recall, the blessings through Abraham would not come in a simple fashion. In Genesis 12:3 we learn that God would give Abraham success through a process of blessing Abraham's friends and cursing his enemies. In a variety of episodes, Moses pointed out how God gave Abraham foretastes of this process in his own lifetime as he interacted with other peoples representing different nations. And on a number of occasions in his stories of Abraham's life, Moses pointed out that many fulfillments would come in the future.

Moses stressed this motif because it was so relevant to the people of Israel who followed him in his day. God assured them of success in being a blessing to others because he would bless their friends and curse their enemies. They too had seen foretastes of these promises as they interacted with various groups of people in their own day. They had already seen God bless those who were their friends and curse their enemies on a number of occasions. And beyond this, Moses also focused on these matters to turn the eyes of the Israelites toward future fulfillments as they entered the Promised Land and spread the kingdom of God to the ends of the earth. As we have just seen, in Exodus 19:6 God said this to Israel:

**You will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation (Exodus
19:6).**

This vision of the nation as a kingdom of priests did not simply point out that the nation itself would be blessed with the privilege of being a holy people serving God, but also pointed out that the children of Israel would serve God's purposes throughout the world.

As Moses inspired Israel to move toward the Promised Land, his stories about Abraham were designed to instill within them the vision of how God was going to use Israel to spread his kingdom and thus his blessings to the entire world.

Now that we have seen the implications of the four major themes of Abraham's life for the original audience, let's briefly summarize the impact of Abraham's stories on the original audience by looking at each major step in the structure of the patriarch's life as it is recorded in Genesis.

FIVE STEPS

You will recall that the stories about Abraham's life divide into five main steps. First, Abraham's background and early experiences in 11:10–12:9; second, Abraham's earlier interactions with representatives of other peoples in 12:10–14:24; third, the covenant that God made with Abraham in 15:1–17:27; fourth, Abraham's later interactions with representatives of other peoples in 18:1–21:34; and fifth, Abraham's progeny and death in 22:1–25:18.

Each of these major steps divides into a number of smaller segments or episodes. We will briefly summarize the content and some of the main implications that these episodes had for the original audience for whom Moses wrote.

Background and Early Experiences

The first step of Abraham's life, his background and early experiences, reported several features of Abraham's family and the time when God first called Abraham into his service. In general terms, Moses designed this first step to show his original Israelite audience how they could learn about their own family background and their call from God from these events in Abraham's life.

This first step divides into three episodes or segments. The life of Abraham begins with a genealogy that presents Abraham's divinely-favored lineage in 11:10-26. These verses establish that Abraham was a climactic character in the family of Shem, a family that held a favored status before God as God's special chosen people. This genealogy in turn should have reminded Moses' original Israelite audience that as the family line of Abraham, they shared this same favored status. They were God's special chosen people.

The second episode of Abraham's background and early experiences is another genealogy in 11:27-32. In a nutshell, this passage depicts Terah as an idolater who attempted to go to the land of Canaan but failed. Moses' original audience easily would have seen the similarity between Abraham's circumstances and their own. Their parents had been involved in idolatry and had failed to reach the land of Canaan as well. So, just as Abraham had to avoid repeating his father's failures, the Israelites who followed Moses also had to avoid repeating the failures of their fathers and mothers, the idolaters of the first generation of the exodus who failed to reach Canaan.

Abraham's background and early experiences then move to the story of Abraham's migration to Canaan in 12:1-9. God called Abraham to the land of Canaan,

and Abraham obeyed the call of God despite many difficulties. In much the same way, God called Moses' original Israelite audience to the land of Canaan, and they were also to obey despite many difficulties. So the story of Abraham's migration to Canaan had the original implication that the Israelites in Moses' day were to follow the footsteps of Abraham and migrate as he did to the land of Canaan.

With these three segments, Moses introduced Abraham's life and offered significant guidance for his original audience as they faced the challenges of their own service to God.

Early Contacts with Others

The second major step in the Genesis account of Abraham's life concentrates on the patriarch's earlier interactions with other peoples. These chapters depict the patriarch interacting with other groups of people in a variety of ways to guide the original Israelite readers as they interacted with others.

In the first episode, Moses described Abraham's deliverance from Egypt in Genesis 12:10-20. You will recall that the patriarch sojourned in Egypt because of a famine, but God delivered him from Egyptian bondage by sending diseases on Pharaoh's house. Because of God's great deliverance Abraham left Egypt with many riches and never returned. Abraham learned very clearly that Egypt was not his home.

Moses' original Israelite readers could see that their own experiences reflected many aspects of Abraham's story. They had gone to Egypt because of a famine, they had also been delivered when God sent diseases on the Egyptians, and they had left Egypt with many riches from the Egyptians. Unfortunately, as the Israelites faced difficulties in their travels, many of them began to idealize life in Egypt and wanted to return. This episode should have made it clear to the original audience that Egypt was not their home. They were to remember how God had graciously delivered them, and to leave Egypt and the Egyptians far behind.

The second segment of Abraham's earlier interactions with others is the story of his conflict with Lot in 13:1-18. This is the well-known story of struggle between Abraham's men and Lot's men, when the two groups quarreled over natural resources for their sheep. In this struggle, Abraham treated Lot with kindness, allowing Lot to live in peace in the lands he chose. The original readers of Genesis would have had little trouble understanding what this story meant for them. According to Deuteronomy 2, as they traveled towards the Promised Land Moses commanded the Israelites to treat Lot's descendants with kindness, to let them live at peace in their ancestral land. In effect, Abraham's kind treatment of Lot showed the Israelites how to treat the Moabites in their day.

The third episode of Abraham's earlier interactions with others is the story of Abraham's rescue of Lot in 14:1-24. This complex story described how Abraham defeated powerful, tyrannical kings who had come from afar, and how he showed further kindness to Lot by rescuing him from these tyrannical kings. This story spoke rather plainly to the Israelites following Moses. As Israel passed through the lands of the Moabites and Ammonites, who descended from Lot, the army of Israel defeated the tyrannical kings Sihon of the Amorites, and Og of Bashan, both of whom had oppressed

the Moabites and Ammonites. By rescuing the Moabites and the Ammonites in this way, Israel followed the model that Abraham had set for them.

And so it is that in each episode of this step of Abraham's life, Abraham was presented as a model for Israel to follow in their own times.

Covenant with God

Now we come to the third major step of Abraham's life, the covenant that God made with Abraham in 15:1–17:27. In general terms, this step focuses on God's covenant with the patriarch in ways that reveal the character of Israel's covenant relationship with God. These chapters divide into three main segments.

The first episode focuses especially on God's covenant promises to Abraham in 15:1-21. This chapter is the well-known account of the time when God entered into a covenant with Abraham. God promised to give Abraham progeny and land. Specifically, God promised that Abraham would have a multitude of descendants, and that after a time of mistreatment in a foreign land, Abraham's descendants would be brought back to the land of promise. This passage was designed to remind the Israelites that God had made a similar covenant with Israel through Moses. And more than this, it showed them that they themselves were experiencing the fulfillment of God's promises to Abraham. The Israelites were Abraham's promised progeny, and they were returning to the very land that God had promised to their patriarch. To doubt these facts was to doubt the gracious covenant promises God had made to Abraham and reaffirmed with Moses.

The second episode that focuses on God's covenant with Abraham is the patriarch's failure with Hagar in 16:1-16. This sad story recalls how Abraham and Sarah turned from the covenant promises of God by seeking a child through Sarah's Egyptian handmaiden, Hagar. Abraham and Sarah failed to trust God's covenant promises, but God rejected their alternative plan by not accepting the child Ishmael as Abraham's true seed. Moses' original audience repeatedly turned from God's promises in covenant and desired the comforts of Egypt. And this story from Abraham's life taught them that just as Abraham's plan had been rejected, their alternatives to God's plan would also be rejected.

The third episode focusing on God's covenant with Abraham is the account of Abraham's covenant requirement in 17:1-27. In this passage, God confronted the patriarch over his failure to follow God's plan. The Lord also reasserted the need for covenant loyalty by instituting circumcision as a covenant sign that was to be applied to Abraham and his sons. By this sign, God reminded Abraham that his covenant relationship entailed the responsibility of loyalty, and that loyalty would lead to great blessings. Moses recounted this side of Abraham's covenant to confront the Israelites in his day over their failures to remain faithful and to reassert the Israelites' need for covenant loyalty. Only as the Israelites were faithful to their covenant God could they rightly hope for his great blessings.

So, the centerpiece of Abraham's life, his covenant with God, drew attention to the grace of God's marvelous promises to Israel. But it also forcefully reminded his audience that they were obligated to display loyal service to their covenant God.

Later Contacts with Others

Now we come to the fourth step of Abraham's life: his later interactions with others in 18:1–21:34. In these chapters Abraham encountered various people who were associated with people living in Moses' day. Abraham interacted with the Canaanite inhabitants of Sodom and Gomorrah, Lot, Abimelech, and Ishmael. In general terms, Abraham's interactions with these people taught Israel how they would interact with the Canaanites, the Moabites and Ammonites, and the Philistines and Ishmaelites of their day.

The first story of this portion of the patriarch's life is the account of Sodom and Gomorrah in 18:1–19:38. This well-known narrative tells of the threat of divine judgment against the evil Canaanite cities. It tells about Abraham's concern for the righteous in the cities, and the destruction of these cities as well as Lot's rescue. These events spoke directly to the situation facing Moses' original audience. They helped them understand what was happening with people living in their day: God's threat against the Canaanites, the concern they were to have for the righteous among the Canaanites (like Rahab whom they would encounter in Jericho), the destruction that was sure to come against the Canaanite cities, and their relationship with Lot's descendants, the Moabites and Ammonites.

The second portion of Abraham's later interactions with others appears in 20:1-18. In this story Abraham once again interceded for an inhabitant of the land, namely for Abimelech the Philistine. You will recall that Abimelech threatened Abraham's future by taking Sarah from Abraham, not knowing she was his wife. Then, God brought judgment against Abimelech, and Abimelech proved to be righteous by repenting of his actions. As a result of this repentance, Abraham interceded on Abimelech's behalf, and Abraham and Abimelech enjoyed lasting peace and friendship with each other.

This story spoke to the Israelites in Moses' day about the attitudes they were to have toward the Philistines in their day. In a variety of ways, the Philistines threatened Israel. But when the threat of God's judgment brought repentance among the Philistines, the Israelites were to intercede on their behalf, and to enjoy lasting peace with them.

The third narrative of this section, found in 21:1-21, focuses on the difficult relationship between Isaac and Ishmael. Isaac and Ishmael were both sons of Abraham. But when tensions rose between them, God instructed Abraham to separate Ishmael from the family. God still blessed Ishmael, but made it very clear that Abraham's only rightful heir was Isaac. As Moses informed his original Israelite audience of these events, he helped them understand the nature of their relationship with the Ishmaelites of their day. When tensions rose between Israel and the Ishmaelites, the Israelites were to remember that God had ordained a separation between them. Although God blessed the Ishmaelites in many ways, the Israelites were the true heirs of Abraham.

The fourth episode of Abraham's later interactions with others is the story of Abraham's Treaty with Abimelech in 21:22-34. This story reports how the Philistine Abimelech acknowledged God's favor toward Abraham, and how Abraham agreed to live in peace with Abimelech and his descendants. It goes on to tell how controversy arose over water rights for Abraham's sheep, and how Abimelech and Abraham entered a formal treaty at Beersheba, pledging mutual respect and honor.

Abimelech and his commander reminded Moses and the Israelites of the potent threat the Philistines were in their day. Here, Moses taught his followers that if the Philistines would acknowledge God's blessing on Israel, then Israel should follow Abraham's example and live in peace with them. The well called Beersheba still remained in Moses' day, reminding Israel of the treaty made there, and of how they were to pursue peace and mutual honor with the Philistines.

So, we see that the stories of Abraham's later interactions involved many characters who corresponded to people who Moses and Israel encountered. By looking at Abraham's actions the Israelites could learn many lessons for their day.

Progeny and Death

Now we come to the final step of Moses' record of Abraham's life, his progeny and death in Genesis 22:1–25:18. These episodes focus on Abraham's legacy, which extended his covenant relationship with God to future generations. In general terms, the Israelites who first received these stories from Moses should have learned much about their own status as Abraham's heirs, and about the hopes they were to have for their own progeny.

The first episode in this portion of Abraham's life is the well-known story of Abraham's test in 22:1-24. This test was designed to determine if Abraham loved God more than he loved his son Isaac. God initiated a difficult test, calling Abraham to sacrifice his son. Abraham complied, and God assured Abraham that the result of his compliance would be a very bright future for Isaac.

Although there were countless implications of this story for the Israelites following Moses, the most prominent feature of this passage was that it reminded them that God was testing the nation of Israel to see the depth of their loyalty to him. God initiated many tests for the nation of Israel in Moses' day. And Abraham's compliance to his test reminded them of their own need to comply with these tests, no matter how difficult they were. And the affirmation of Isaac's grand future as Abraham's progeny reminded the Israelites of the grand future they themselves would have if they passed these tests.

The second episode of the last step of Abraham's life is the story of the patriarch's purchase of burial property in 23:1-20. This story describes how Abraham acquired a family burial site in Hebron when his wife Sarah died. The narrative emphasizes that the patriarch did not accept this property as a gift, but rather that he purchased it. This deed of property established his family's legal right to see the land of Canaan as their homeland.

The Israelites following Moses understood the importance and implications of this purchased burial site for their own lives. It was their ancestral burial site. Abraham, Isaac and Jacob were all buried there. They understood that it was their legal possession in the land, even prior to the conquest. Abraham, Isaac and Jacob spent much of their lives in and around Hebron. The Israelites were so committed to Hebron as their ancestral homeland that they even carried the bones of the patriarch Jacob back to Hebron for burial. This story about Abraham's purchased burial land demonstrated that the proper place for his descendants was none other than the land of the Canaanites.

The third episode of Abraham's progeny and death is a touching story about Abraham's daughter-in-law, Rebekah, who became the wife of his special son Isaac in 24:1-67. In this story, in order to ensure that Isaac would avoid Canaanite corruption, Abraham insisted that Isaac not marry a Canaanite woman. But Abraham also insured that Isaac would remain in the land of Canaan, the land of promise, by sending a servant to bring a wife to Isaac. By finding a wife for Isaac in this way, Abraham insured a great future of blessings from God for Isaac and his descendants.

The Israelites following Moses should have learned from this story that Isaac, their ancestral connection to Abraham, remained pure from Canaanite corruption even as he maintained his homeland in Canaan. Isaac's bright future of blessing would be their future as well, so long as they also resisted the corruption of the Canaanites who dwelled in the Promised Land.

The final episode of Abraham's life is the story of the patriarch's death and heir in 25:1-18. This collection of several brief accounts lists Abraham's sons by wives other than Sarah. Then it turns to the patriarch's death, during which Isaac received Abraham's final blessing as his legal heir. Finally, it closes with a contrasting section that briefly lists Ishmael's descendants.

This closing of Abraham's life had many implications for the original audience. It listed the other sons of Abraham to distinguish them from the Israelites. It highlighted Abraham's final blessing on Isaac to assure the Israelites following Moses that they were the true heirs of Abraham's promises. And it mentioned Ishmael's descendants to dispel any claims the Ishmaelites might have made to Abraham's inheritance. By closing his account of Abraham's life in this way, Moses settled the identity, rights and responsibilities of Abraham's true descendants, the Israelites whom he led toward the Promised Land.

So we see that Moses wrote his stories about the life of Abraham to teach the Israelites he led why and how they should leave Egypt behind and move toward the conquest of the Promised Land. To accomplish this goal, Moses stressed in various ways in each episode of the patriarch's life how they were the heirs of the grace given to the patriarch, how they were responsible to be loyal to God as the patriarch had been responsible, how they would receive blessings from God as Abraham had, and how they would one day bless all the nations of the earth. Moses' account of Abraham's life had immeasurable implications for the Israelites who followed him toward the Promised Land.

CONCLUSION

In this lesson we have looked at the original meaning of the account of Abraham's life in Genesis. And we have looked in two main directions to explore this original meaning: on the one hand we have examined the connections Moses established between these stories and the experiences of the Israelites to whom he wrote. And on the other hand, we have looked at how Moses designed his stories to impact his original audience as they left Egypt behind and moved toward the conquest of Canaan.

As we learn more about the connections Moses drew between Abraham and the original Israelite readers, and the impact he expected his story to have on his audience, we will discover how each episode of Abraham's life was intended to guide the Israelites. And we will also be better able to discern how these stories should apply to our lives today.

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Father Abraham

LESSON
THREE

THE LIFE OF ABRAHAM: MODERN APPLICATION



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Father Abraham

Lesson Three

The Life of Abraham: Modern Application

INTRODUCTION

If there is one thing that many modern people find difficult about the Bible, it is this: it's hard to imagine that stories written thousands of years ago have the ability to guide our lives today. And this is certainly true about the accounts of Abraham in the Bible. Abraham himself lived about four thousand years ago, and the stories about him were written nearly 3600 years ago. But as followers of Christ, we are committed to the fact that these stories are part of Scripture and therefore are profitable even for modern people.

But even with this commitment the question still remains: how do these stories about Abraham apply to our lives today? How do we bridge that 4000-year gap separating us from Abraham?

We have entitled this series, Father Abraham, because we are exploring the life of Abraham as it appears in the book of Genesis. This lesson is the third of three introductory lessons in this series, and we have entitled it, "The Life of Abraham: Modern Application." In this lesson, we will conclude our overview of Abraham's life by concentrating on the proper way to draw modern applications from the chapters in Genesis that speak of Abraham. How should we apply the stories about Abraham to our lives? What kinds of impact are they to have on us today?

To understand how the life of Abraham applies to our world, we will look in two basic directions: first, the connections that exist between Abraham and Jesus, and second, the connections that exist between the original audience of Israel and the modern audience of the church.

Before we look at the modern application of Abraham's life we should take a moment to review what we have seen in previous lessons. We have learned that the story of Abraham divides into five symmetrical steps. First Abraham's life begins with Abraham's background and early experiences in 11:10–12:9. Second, several episodes concentrate on Abraham's earlier interactions with representatives of other peoples in 12:10–14:24. The third and central segment focuses on the covenant that God made with Abraham in 15:1–17:27. The fourth section turns to Abraham's later interactions with representatives of other peoples in 18:1–21:34. And the fifth segment deals with Abraham's progeny and death in 22:1–25:18. These five sections present the patriarch's life in a symmetrical pattern. The third section, which deals with God's covenant with Abraham, serves as the centerpiece of Abraham's life. The second and fourth sections compare to each other as they both focus on Abraham's interactions with other peoples. And the first and last sections correspond to each other by providing bookends to Abraham's life, tracing his family line from the past and into the future. Beyond the basic structure of Abraham's life, we have also seen in previous lessons that Moses had a purpose in writing Abraham's life. Moses wrote about Abraham to teach Israel why and how they were to leave Egypt behind and to continue toward the conquest of the

Promised Land. In other words, by seeing the historical backgrounds of their lives in Abraham, by finding models or examples to follow and reject in Abraham's stories and by discerning how Abraham's life foreshadowed their own lives, the Israelites, following Moses could see the ways they were to pursue God's purpose for them. With this review of previous lessons in mind, we are now ready to turn to the modern application of Abraham's life story.

ABRAHAM AND JESUS

Let's look first at the connections that exist between Abraham and Jesus. Unfortunately, many times Christians apply Abraham's life more or less directly to modern lives. We approach the stories of Abraham as simple moral stories that speak directly to our lives. As Christians however, we know that our relationship with Abraham is mediated; Abraham's life is relevant for us because we have been joined to Abraham's special seed, Christ. Christ stands between us and Abraham. And for this reason, we must always view the biblical stories about Abraham in the light of Christ and what he has done.

To understand the connections between the patriarch and Christ we will touch on two issues. On the one hand, we will explore how the New Testament teaches that Christ is the seed of Abraham. And on the other hand, we will see how the four major themes we have noticed in the life of Abraham apply to Christ as the seed of Abraham. Let's look first at the concept that Jesus is Abraham's seed.

SEED OF ABRAHAM

Now there is a sense in which Abraham is the father of all believers throughout history — men, women and children. We are all a part of his family, his children and his heirs. But as we will see, the New Testament makes it very clear that we enjoy this status because we have been joined to Christ who is the special seed of Abraham. To grasp how the Scriptures teach this perspective we will touch briefly on two matters: first, the singularity of the concept of "seed;" second, the concept of Christ as the unique seed of Abraham.

Singularity

Let's think first of the ways the Bible draws attention to the singularity of Abraham's seed. Perhaps the most significant passage that focuses on this issue is Galatians 3:16. There we find these words:

The promises were spoken to Abraham and to his seed. The Scripture does not say “and to seeds,” meaning many people, but “and to your seed,” meaning one person, who is Christ (Galatians 3:16).

In this passage, Paul referred to the fact that in Genesis God made promises to Abraham and to his seed, or offspring. But notice how Paul commented specifically on the expression “seed,” saying that God did not make promises to Abraham and to his seeds — that is, to many people — but to Abraham and his seed, that is to one person, Christ.

Paul argued this way by noting that the Hebrew word *zera* which is translated “seed” is a singular word. The same was true for the Greek word *sperma* in the Greek translation of the Old Testament available in Paul’s day. As Paul noted, God did not say to Abraham that the promise was to Abraham and his *seeds* (in the plural) but to his *seed*, in the singular.

Now on the surface, it would appear that Paul’s point of view was straightforward. Abraham’s inheritance came to just one seed, or one descendant because the word is singular. But Paul’s argument about the singularity of the word “seed” has raised all kinds of difficulties for interpreters. The problem may be put in this way. It is true that the word “seed” or *zera* is singular in form, but many times in the Old Testament, including in the stories of Abraham’s life, the word “seed” in its singular form must be taken as a collective singular in meaning, a singular word that refers to a group. The Hebrew word *zera* or “seed” is much like our English word “offspring.” Even though this word is singular in form, it can refer to just one offspring or “descendant” or it can refer collectively to many offspring or “descendants.”

For instance, the term “seed” or *zera* is definitely plural in meaning in Genesis 15:13. There we read these words that God spoke to Abraham.

Know for certain that your descendants will be strangers in a country not their own, and they will be enslaved and mistreated four hundred years (Genesis 15:13).

Here, the word “descendants” translates the singular Hebrew word *zera*, but the word is clearly plural in meaning. This verse speaks of the seed as “their own” in the plural, and the verbs “they will be enslaved and mistreated” are also plural in Hebrew.

Of course, Paul knew that the singular form of the word “seed” referred to more than one person many times in Genesis. In fact, Paul himself used the word seed in a plural sense in Galatians 3:29 where he wrote these words,

You are Abraham’s seed, and heirs according to the promise (Galatians 3:29).

In the Greek of this verse, the phrase “you are” translates *este*, a plural verb. And “Abraham’s seed” is synonymous with the word “heirs,” *kleronomoi*, which is also plural.

In this light we have to ask a question. If Paul knew that the singular form of the term “seed” could refer to more than one person, why then did he stress its singularity? In all likelihood, Paul had in mind one particular passage in the life of Abraham, Genesis

22:16-18. In these verses, the term “seed” is definitely singular in meaning. Listen to this literal translation of these verses:

By myself I have sworn, declares the Lord, because you ... have not withheld your son, your only son, indeed I will greatly bless you, and I will greatly multiply your seed as the stars of the heavens and as the sand which is on the seashore; and your seed shall possess the gate of his enemies. In your seed all the nations of the earth shall be blessed, because you have obeyed my voice (Genesis 22:16-18, literal).

Unfortunately, many modern translations render this passage as if “seed” were a collective singular. But we have to remember that this verse is part of the story of the sacrifice of Isaac. And here the word “seed” referred not to Abraham’s descendants in general, but to Isaac, Abraham’s son. The verb, “shall possess,” is singular in the Hebrew, and notice also that the pronoun in the phrase “his enemies” is singular. As we will see in later lessons, Genesis chapter 22 and the chapters that follow spend time distinguishing Isaac, the son of Sarah, from his other sons, the son of Hagar, and the sons of Keturah. Isaac was the special seed of promise, the one whom God had chosen as Abraham’s only heir. So, before Isaac’s birth, Genesis usually speaks of Abraham’s “seed” as a collective, meaning “descendants” in the plural, but here the word has a focus on Isaac as the special singular descendant who would inherit Abraham’s promises.

In this light we can understand Paul’s basic point when he referred to the single seed of Abraham. Paul noted that in Genesis chapter 22 God did not make promises to Abraham and directly to all of his descendants. He pointed out that the singularity of the word “seed” in Genesis 22:16-18 indicates that the promises were passed to Isaac, Abraham’s special son and heir.

Christ as Seed

With the singularity of the seed of Abraham in mind, we should now turn to the teaching that Christ is the seed of Abraham. Listen again to what the apostle said in Galatians 3:16.

The promises were spoken to Abraham and to his seed. The Scripture does not say “and to seeds,” meaning many people, but “and to your seed,” meaning one person, who is Christ (Galatians 3:16).

In this passage Paul not only drew attention to the fact that the seed of Abraham was singular but that the one seed of Abraham is Christ. Now, as we have already seen, in terms of the original meaning of Genesis the singular seed of Abraham of whom Moses wrote was none other than Isaac, the special son of promise born to Sarah. How then should we understand Paul when he wrote that Abraham’s one seed is Jesus?

Think of it this way. Abraham’s inheritance was a family inheritance that belongs to his descendants. But at a number of crucial points in the history of Scripture, God

chose several key figures to serve as special heirs who received and distributed Abraham's inheritance to others. In the case of Isaac, he was the special seed in distinction from Abraham's other sons. When Isaac had two sons, Jacob and Esau, God chose Jacob to be the special seed of Abraham and excluded Esau and his descendants. From Jacob came the twelve patriarchs of the tribes of Israel. But among the tribes of Israel several figures were special heirs of Abraham. Moses, for instance, was the leader and mediator of God's people as they moved from Egypt to the Promised Land. And later, as Israel became a full fledged empire, David and his sons held the special role of mediating the inheritance of Abraham.

It is this special role of David and his sons that led Paul to refer to Christ as the last great seed of Abraham because Jesus is the rightful heir of David's throne. He was chosen by God to be the permanent king of his people. He is the great eternal royal seed of Abraham, the Messiah. And as such, Christ is the only one through whom anyone else can participate in Abraham's inheritance. No one separated from Christ will ever receive the promises of Abraham.

So, we can summarize Jesus in relation to Abraham in this way. From a Christian point of view, Jesus is the unique, final seed of Abraham. And as Christians when we want to apply the life of Abraham to the modern world, we must always keep in mind that the connection between Abraham and our world is that Abraham's great blessings are passed to Christ as he inaugurated his kingdom, as he continues to build his kingdom now and as he will bring his kingdom to its consummation.

The New Testament teaches that Christ receives and distributes Abraham's inheritance in three main stages. First, in the inauguration of his kingdom that occurred in his first coming; second, in the continuation of his kingdom that extends to all of history after his first coming but prior to his return; and third, at the consummation of his kingdom in his glorious second coming. He continues to receive and distribute Abraham's inheritance in increasing measure as he reigns over all at the right hand of God the Father. And he will one day fully receive and fully distribute Abraham's inheritance when he returns in glory.

In a word, it is important to realize that in Galatians 3:16 Paul encapsulated a rather complex theological outlook in just a few words. When Paul said that the promise was to Abraham and his singular seed, and then identified that seed as Christ, he was not saying that the word "seed" in Genesis referred directly to Jesus. Instead, Paul spoke in an abbreviated fashion of a typology that exists between Isaac and Christ. To state the matter more fully, we could put it this way: like Isaac was the chief heir of Abraham in his generation, Christ is Abraham's greatest son, and the chief heir of Abraham in the New Testament age.

MAJOR THEMES

To see more fully the significance of Christ as the seed of Abraham, it will help to explore these matters in terms of the four major themes that we have seen in Abraham's stories. You will recall that we have seen four major themes in these chapters of Genesis: divine Grace, Abraham's loyalty, God's blessings to Abraham, and God's blessings

through Abraham. How should we understand these motifs in light of the connections that exist between Abraham and Christ?

Divine Grace

In the first place, we have seen that God demonstrated much grace in Abraham's life. Of course, Abraham had to have personal grace because he was a sinner, but beyond this, God's mercy toward Abraham was also an objective display of God's kindness. By building a relationship with Abraham, God actually furthered the redemption of the entire world.

Now as much as God showed kindness in Abraham's life, as Christians we believe that the grace of God toward the patriarch was little more than a shadow of the mercy God displayed in Christ. Of course, Christ himself was without sin so he did not receive saving grace himself, but still the coming of Christ as the seed of Abraham was a great objective act of God's mercy to the world.

God demonstrated much mercy in Christ's first coming, the inauguration of the kingdom. His life, death, resurrection, and ascension and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit were magnificent displays of God's grace. And God extends even more mercy as Christ reigns now in heaven, during the continuation of His kingdom. As salvation has spread throughout the world, God has demonstrated the kindness revealed in Christ in the undeniable transformation of the world throughout history. And when Christ returns, the consummation of the kingdom will bring immeasurable mercy. Christ will return and bring a new heavens and a new earth. As followers of Christ, every time we see God showing kindness in the stories of Abraham, our hearts and minds should turn to the mercy God revealed in these three stages of His kingdom in Christ.

Abraham's Loyalty

In the second place, another important theme in Moses' presentation of Abraham's life was Abraham's loyalty to God. Initially, God required Abraham to fulfill the responsibility of migrating to the Promised Land. But God also required many other things of Abraham throughout his life. As Christians when we read about the responsibilities Abraham faced, we should find our hearts and minds moving toward Christ the seed of Abraham and toward his loyalty to his heavenly Father.

And of course, Christ was loyal to the Father in all three stages of his kingdom. In the inauguration of the kingdom, Christ himself proved to be utterly faithful to God's requirements of loyalty. Although Abraham was loyal to God in very significant ways, Christ was perfectly faithful at every moment of his life. And beyond this, as king over all during the continuation of the kingdom Christ remains true and faithful to his heavenly father. He reigns over all serving the purposes of God perfectly by extending the gospel and the redemption of his people.

Finally, when Christ returns at the consummation of the kingdom he will finish the works of righteousness he began in his life on earth. He will destroy all of God's

enemies and make all things new for the glory of his father. So, every time we see the theme of Abraham's loyalty to God we know that as Christians we can properly apply these matters to the modern world only as we connect them properly to Christ, the seed of Abraham.

Blessings to Abraham

In the third place, as Christians we are not only interested in seeing how these themes of divine grace and human loyalty apply to our day in Christ, we are also keenly interested in the third main theme of Abraham's life: the blessings of God to Abraham. God told Abraham that Israel would become a great nation, that prosperity would come to the nation in the land of promise, and that Abraham and Israel would have a great name, worldwide notoriety.

Now, once again as Christians our minds should move toward the blessings that God gave to Christ, Abraham's seed. At his first coming, Christ was raised from the dead and received all authority in heaven and earth; and there is no name in heaven and earth that is as great as the name of Jesus. Jesus continues to enjoy the increase of blessings now during the continuation of the kingdom. He gains more and more glory for himself as he rules the world according to the will of God. But in the consummation, when Christ returns in glory he will enjoy these blessings beyond measure. He will be exalted over all and every knee will bow to him, the great son of Abraham. So it is that whenever we see Abraham receiving blessings from God, our eyes should turn toward Christ who inherits Abraham's promises and enjoys God's blessings in even greater measure.

Blessings through Abraham

Finally, the fourth major theme in Abraham's life is the blessings that would come through Abraham to others. God said that through a process of blessing and cursing, all peoples on the earth would be blessed through Abraham. This grand promise is the focus of much attention in the New Testament. Listen to the way Paul referred to this promise to Abraham in Romans 4:13. There he says,

It was not through law that Abraham and his offspring received the promise that he would be heir of the world, but through the righteousness that comes by faith (Romans 4:13).

Notice here that when God promised Abraham that he would bless all nations, he promised that this would come about by Abraham taking possession of all nations and spreading the kingdom of God to all the world. Abraham and his offspring were to be heirs of the world, with all the nations under their headship. As Adam and Eve were originally told to subdue the entire earth, God promised that Abraham and his descendants would inherit the entire earth by spreading God's blessings to all the families of every nation.

Now, this final theme of the worldwide distribution of Abraham's blessings applies to Christ as well because he is the seed of Abraham and heir to Abraham's promises. In the inauguration of the kingdom, Christ called a faithful people from the nation of Israel. But when he rose from the dead and ascended to his throne in heaven, he was raised as the king of all the earth and told his faithful remnant to spread the blessings of Israel to all nations. During the continuation of the kingdom, the spread of Christ's kingship over all nations through the gospel is the fulfillment of the promise to Abraham to bless all nations. And when Christ returns at the consummation of the kingdom, He will extend the blessings of God to all the nations of the earth. As we read in Revelation 22:1-2:

Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, as clear as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb down the middle of the great street of the city. On each side of the river stood the tree of life, bearing twelve crops of fruit, yielding its fruit every month. And the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations (Revelation 22:1-2).

The promise that Abraham would be a blessing to all nations is ultimately fulfilled in the inauguration, continuation and consummation of Christ's kingdom.

So, we can sum up the matter in this way. Proper modern application of Abraham's life to our world must always involve at least an implicit recognition of the role of Christ as Abraham's seed. As the special seed of Abraham, Christ is the one who fulfills or completes the themes we encounter in Abraham's life. God's mercy is shown in Christ; true and perfect loyalty is found in Christ; Christ receives all the blessings promised to Abraham, and in Christ we see the spread of Abraham's rich blessings to the ends of the earth. Whatever else we may say about modern application, it is essential that we remember these connections between Abraham and Jesus.

Now that we have seen how the relationship between Abraham and Jesus forms a vital connection between the stories of Abraham and our world today, we should turn to a second aspect of modern application, the connection between Israel and the Church.

ISRAEL AND THE CHURCH

We must always remember that when Moses first composed his account of Abraham's life, he wrote about these things to encourage the people of Israel to leave Egypt behind and to enter into the conquest of the Promised Land. They were to find the historical background of this vision in Abraham's life; they were to fulfill it by finding examples to follow and to reject in the stories of Abraham's life; and they were even to see foreshadows of their experiences in Abraham's life. For this reason, if we are going to see how the stories of Abraham apply to the modern world, we must take into account what the NT teaches about the connections between the nation of Israel following Moses and the Christian church today.

To explore this relationship between Israel and the church, we will touch on two topics that parallel our previous discussion. First, we will explore further the theme of the seed of Abraham as it applies to the nation of Israel and to the church of Christ. And second, we will see how the theme of Abraham's seed is expressed in the four major themes of the stories of Abraham's life. Let's look first at Israel and the church as the seed of Abraham.

SEED OF ABRAHAM

To see the connections between Israel and the church as the seed of Abraham we will touch briefly on four matters. First, we will see the numerical breadth of Abraham's seed. Second, we will take notice of the ethnic identity of his seed. Third, we will focus on the spiritual character of Abraham's seed. And fourth, we will look at the historical situation of Abraham's seed. Consider first the numerical breadth of the seed of Abraham.

Numerical Breadth

Now as we have just seen, the book of Genesis makes it clear that the term "Abraham's seed," referred on occasion to one special person, Isaac, and the New Testament draws upon this to establish a connection between Abraham and Christ. But now we must expand our vision to see another feature of the biblical view of Abraham's seed. Isaac was not the only person in the stories of Abraham who was called Abraham's seed or offspring. Isaac did not receive Abraham's inheritance for himself alone. He was also the conduit through whom many would enjoy the status of being Abraham's descendants. For this reason, over and over Moses also spoke of the nation of Israel as Abraham's seed. And in much the same way, when we apply the stories of Abraham to our modern world, while it is important to remember that Christ is the supreme seed of Abraham in the New Testament, we must also remember that the Christian church is the seed of Abraham. As Paul put it in Galatians 3:29,

**You are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise
(Galatians 3:29).**

As Paul made clear in this passage, we are connected to Abraham because we are joined to Christ. We, like the nation of Israel in the Old Testament, are the seed of Abraham. For this reason, Abraham's stories do not simply apply to Christ himself, but also to the breadth of the many children of Abraham who are identified with him in the church.

Ethnic Identity

Now beyond the fact that the seed of Abraham was Israel in the Old Testament and the Christian church today, we should also comment on the ethnic identity of Abraham's seed in both Testaments. As we have seen, the stories of Abraham were written in the first place for the nation of Israel who followed Moses. While it is certainly true that the vast majority of the original audience consisted of ethnic Jews, that is Abraham's physical descendants, it is a mistake to think that the original audience was entirely or purely Jewish. The vast numbers of people who followed Moses were a mixture of Jews and Gentiles who had been adopted into Israel. As a result, on a number of occasions, the Scriptures make it clear that the original audience of Genesis was not exclusively Jewish.

Listen, for instance, to the way those who followed Moses are described in Exodus 12:38:

Many other people went up with them, as well as large droves of livestock, both flocks and herds (Exodus 12:38).

Notice here that included among the Israelites were "other people." This company consisted of Gentiles who had joined with Israel and left Egypt with them. This group is mentioned on a number of occasions in Scripture. In much the same way, later portions of the Old Testament reveal that well-known Gentiles like Rahab and Ruth were engrafted into Israel in later generations, and the genealogies of First Chronicles 1–9 include Gentile names among God's people.

So we see that the seed of Abraham to whom Moses originally wrote the stories of Abraham was ethnically mixed. It included Abraham's physical descendants and Gentiles who had been adopted into the family of Israel. Both groups learned about their future in the Promised Land through the stories of Abraham.

In much the same way, the Christian church today is ethnically diverse. It consists of Jews who claim Christ as their Lord and Gentiles who have been adopted into the family of Abraham because they too claim Christ as Lord. Now, to be sure, as history has unfolded the New Testament church has grown to have more adopted Gentiles than fulfilled Jews, but the ethnic diversity of Abraham's seed is still a reality today as it was in the Old Testament. So, just as Abraham's stories were first given to Jews and Gentiles counted as Abraham's seed, we must be ready to apply Abraham's stories to Jews and Gentiles today who are now counted as Abraham's seed because they are in the church throughout the world.

This is a very important aspect of modern application because so many Christians have endorsed the false teaching that the promises given to Abraham are to be applied only to ethnic Jews today. In this view, God has a separate program for Gentile believers. Apart from a few spiritual principles here and there, Gentile believers are not the heirs of the promises given to Abraham. Now as popular as this outlook may be, we must always remember that the seed of Abraham was ethnically diverse in Moses' day and that the seed of Abraham today continues to be an ethnically diverse people. What Moses taught the nation following him applies to the continuation of that nation today, the church of Jesus Christ.

Spiritual Character

In the third place, modern application of Abraham's life must also take into account the spiritual character of Israel and the church as the seed of Abraham. As we have seen, the Old Testament identifies the visible nation of Israel as the seed of Abraham, the corporate seed of Abraham, but we need to realize that there was spiritual diversity within the visible nation of Israel. There were both unbelievers and true believers. The record of the Old Testament makes it very clear that many of the men, women, and children in the nation of Israel did not truly believe, but others were true believers who trusted the promises of God. To be sure, everyone in Israel, both believers and unbelievers, received many special temporary blessings from God. All of them had been delivered from slavery in Egypt; they were all brought into covenant relationship with God at Sinai; they all had many opportunities for faith and they all were offered entry into the Promised Land. But there were important differences as well. On the one hand, unbelievers within Israel showed the true character of their hearts by infidelity. And the stories of Abraham were designed to call them to true repentance and saving faith.

On the other hand, true believers within Israel believed the promises of God and demonstrated the true character of their hearts by their fidelity. The stories of Abraham were designed to encourage these true believers to grow in their faith. Now due to their infidelity, unbelievers within Israel only received temporary blessings. But in eternity they would receive God's final, eternal judgment. It was the true believers who were Abraham's true seed, his spiritual descendants, the children who not only enjoyed many temporary blessings but would also one day receive the eternal blessing of Abraham's inheritance in the new heavens and new earth. Paul argued this outlook rather forcefully in Romans 9:6-8. Listen to what he said there.

For not all who are descended from Israel are Israel. Nor because they are his descendants are they all Abraham's children. On the contrary, 'It is through Isaac that your offspring will be reckoned.' In other words, it is not the natural children who are God's children, but it is the children of the promise who are regarded as Abraham's offspring (Romans 9:6-8).

Well, it isn't difficult to see that the same kind of spiritual diversity also exists in the church of Christ. Those who are associated with the visible church in the New Testament through baptism consist of two kinds of people: unbelievers and believers. Of course, just as all in Old Testament Israel enjoyed many temporary privileges because of their association with God and his people, there are many temporary blessings for all people involved in the church of Christ. They have a loving community; they have the word of God and the sacraments; they have the gospel explained and offered to them. But many within the visible church show the true character of their hearts by their infidelity. And the stories of Abraham are to be applied to these unbelievers in the church by calling for true repentance and saving faith.

But also within the visible church are true believers who trust the promises of God and demonstrate the character of their hearts by their fidelity. The stories of Abraham are

to be applied to these true believers by encouraging them to grow in their faith throughout their lives. Now due to their infidelity, unbelievers within the church will only receive temporary blessings. In eternity, they will receive God's eternal judgment. But the true seed of Abraham, the true children of Abraham, those who have trusted in Christ will not only receive many temporary blessings, but will also one day receive their eternal reward, Abraham's inheritance in the new heavens and new earth.

This is why James wrote about Abraham as he did in James 2:21-22. Writing to the visible Christian church with both unbelievers and true believers in it, he said these words,

Was not our ancestor Abraham considered righteous for what he did when he offered his son Isaac on the altar? You see that his faith and his actions were working together, and his faith was made complete by what he did (James 2:21-22).

James' main idea here was that the stories of Abraham challenge unbelievers in the church to turn from their hypocrisy and they encourage true believers in the church to continue to express their faith through faithful living. And we must follow James' example by recognizing the spiritual diversity of the church today as we make modern application of Abraham's stories.

Historical Situation

In the fourth place, to apply Abraham's life to the modern world, we must also remember that there is significant similarity between the historical situations of Israel following Moses and the Christian church today. You will recall that Moses wrote about the life of Abraham to Israelites who were on a journey. Whether he wrote for the first or second generation of the exodus, his original audience traveled between two worlds. On the one hand, they had left slavery in Egypt. But on the other hand, they had not yet entered the promised land of Canaan. Or to put it another way, the nation of Israel had received initial deliverance from their old world, but they had not yet entered into their new world. And as a result, Moses wrote to Israel to encourage them to discard all of their attachments to Egypt and to move forward toward victory in the land.

The historical situation of the original audience is important for modern application because the Christian church today is in a parallel historical situation. Just as Israel had been delivered from slavery in Egypt but was still headed toward a glorious life in the Promised Land, the church of Christ has been delivered from the dominion of sin by the work that Christ did when he was here on earth, but it is still headed toward the glory of the new creation that will come when Christ returns. These parallel situations provide us with a frame of reference for making applications of Abraham's life to the church today. Just as Moses wrote about Abraham to encourage and guide Israel on her journey from one place to the other, his stories encourage and guide us on our journey from the world of death to the new world of everlasting life.

We can be sure that these historical parallels provide us with this kind of orientation toward application because the apostle Paul drew upon them as he applied the

Old Testament to the church at Corinth. Listen to the way he noted the historical parallels between Moses' audience and the church in 1 Corinthians 10:1-6.

For I do not want you to be ignorant of the fact brothers that our forefathers were all under the cloud and that they all passed through the sea. They were all baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea. They all ate the same spiritual food and drank the same spiritual drink for they drank from the spiritual rock that accompanied them and that rock was Christ. Nevertheless, God was not pleased with most of them. Their bodies were scattered over the desert. Now these things occurred as examples to keep us from setting our hearts on evil things as they did (1 Corinthians 10:1-6).

Put simply, Paul noted that the Israelites following Moses through the wilderness had experienced things that paralleled the experiences of Christians. They had been delivered by Moses as we have been delivered by Christ. They had been baptized in Moses as Christians have been baptized in Christ. They ate manna and drank water from God much like Christians eat and drink in the sacrament of the Lord's Supper. Yet, these early experiences of grace set Israel into a period of probation, a period of testing as they moved toward the Promised Land. And sadly, in the days of Moses God was not pleased with most of the Israelites and they died in the wilderness. So Paul concluded that Christians should learn from Israel's experience the nature of their journey as the church. From Paul's example, we can learn much about how to apply Abraham's life to the Christian church.

Moses' stories of Abraham's life encouraged Israel to remain faithful as they looked back at what God had done in delivering them from Egypt and as they moved forward toward the Promised Land. In much the same way, we should apply Abraham's stories to the church today in ways that encourage us in our journey. We must remain faithful to Christ because of what he has done in the inauguration of the kingdom. We must continue to be faithful to him as his kingdom grows in our day and we must long for the day when our spiritual journey is over, when we enter into the new heavens and new earth.

So we see that as we move toward modern application of the life of Abraham, we should not only concern ourselves with the connections between Abraham and Jesus. We must also give attention to the connections between the nation of Israel who first received the stories of Abraham and the Christian church. Old Testament Israel and the New Testament church are the seed of Abraham; we both are of mixed ethnic identity; we are both spiritually diverse and we are both on a journey toward the goal of the glorious kingdom of God.

MAJOR THEMES

Having seen that the stories of Abraham's life apply to the Christian church as the continuation of Abraham's seed in the world today, we should also see how this process

of application touches on the four major themes of the chapters given to Abraham's life. What do these motifs have to say about our daily lives in Christ?

As you will recall the stories of Abraham touch on four main issues: divine grace, Abraham's loyalty, God's blessings to Abraham, and God's blessings through Abraham. In the lessons that follow, we will point out again and again how these themes speak to our lives as Abraham's seed. At this point, we will briefly offer some general directions we should follow. Consider first the theme of divine grace.

Divine Grace

God showed much mercy to Abraham, not only at the beginning of his life, but every day of his existence on earth. And as the Scriptures clearly teach, just as God showed mercy to Abraham, God also shows grace to Christians today that initiates and sustains us in Christ. As Paul put it in Ephesians 2:8-9,

For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith — and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God — not by works, so that no one can boast (Ephesians 2:8-9).

Salvation in Christ is God's gracious gift; even the faith we have comes from him. We depend so much on God's mercy that every day of our Christian lives we are to continue to live in that mercy. Without God's sustaining grace, all of our efforts to remain faithful are futile.

For this reason, just as the Israelites following Moses should have learned the wonder of God's grace in their lives as they heard the stories of Abraham's life, every time we read of God showing mercy to Abraham, as followers of Christ, both together and as individuals, we have opportunities to learn how to be grateful for what God has done for us. God has shown much mercy to us and we must learn how to seek and depend on his mercy.

Abraham's Loyalty

In much the same way, the theme of Abraham's loyalty also applies to followers of Christ on many levels. As we read the life of Abraham, we see many situations in which Abraham was commanded to serve God in obedience. Of course, he did not reach perfection in this life, but he did show the fruit of true faith. Now, it is important to remember that even in the Old Testament, faithful obedience was always based on the mercy and grace of God. So, we must not mistake this emphasis as some form of legalism. Nevertheless, just as in the Old Testament, true believers today are expected to respond to God's grace with faithful service to God.

This is why the New Testament frequently emphasizes the responsibility of loyalty for followers of Christ. Listen to the way Paul connected grace and loyalty in Ephesians 2:8-10.

For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith — and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God — not by works, so that no one can boast. For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do (Ephesians 2:8-10).

As verse 10 makes clear, Christians today have the responsibility to perform good works. God grants us saving faith so that we will be faithful to him. So, every time we see how Abraham's life raises issues related to human loyalty, we are in a position to apply those moral responsibilities to our lives.

Blessings to Abraham

In the third place, we should also be cognizant of the ways in which the blessings given to Abraham apply to the Christian life. You will recall that God promised great blessings to Abraham and his seed. Ultimately, they would become a great, prosperous nation of grand renown. And throughout the stories of Abraham we find times when God blessed the patriarch with foretastes of these ultimate blessings.

Just as the original audience of Israel could see the promises to Abraham being fulfilled in their lives as they waited for their ultimate blessings, as Christians today we experience many foretastes of these same blessings here and now as we wait in hope for the day when they will come to us in all of their fullness. The blessings we see in this life can give us much encouragement as we live our daily lives in hope of the ultimate blessings that will be ours when Christ returns.

Blessings through Abraham

Finally, as Abraham's stories focus on the blessings God would give to the world through Abraham, Christians also have opportunity to reflect on the blessings that come through us to the world. You will recall that Abraham was promised protection from enemies and blessings for his friends so that one day he would share God's blessings with all the nations of the earth. And more than this, throughout Abraham's stories, we see that God used Abraham now and then as the instrument of his blessings to all kinds of people.

When the original audience of Genesis learned of these events, they had many opportunities to reflect on events in their day. They found guidance for the ways they were to serve as God's instruments of blessing to the world as they encountered different groups of people. They could be sure of God's protection against enemies and they could move forward with efforts to spread the blessings of God's kingdom to their neighbors.

In much the same way, we Christians today should apply this motif to our lives. We too can have assurance of God's protection and we can find encouragement to be a blessing to all nations of the earth by extending God's kingdom to the ends of the earth.

CONCLUSION

In this lesson on the modern application of Abraham's life, we have explored how the chapters in Genesis devoted to the patriarch are relevant to our world today. We noted first that a Christian approach to this part of the Bible draws attention to Christ as the great seed of Abraham. It looks for ways that Christ fulfills the motifs we discover in Abraham's life. But beyond this, we also looked at how the life of Abraham applies to the church, the corporate seed of Abraham. How men, women and children in Christ are to live according to the teachings of this part of the Scriptures.

As we look more closely at the life of Abraham in Genesis, we will have many opportunities to apply the Patriarch's life to our lives today. We will find that Moses' account of Father Abraham not only draws our hearts toward the patriarch, but also toward Christ the seed of Abraham, and toward the wonder that in Christ we too are Abraham's children and heirs of the promises given to Abraham.

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